

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Protecting the CIA

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Tucked into President Ford's speech to Congress, and ignored in the emotional controversy over Vietnam, was a carefully worded warning that secret operations of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) must be protected from "altered" congressional oversight that threatens "essential secrets."

Mr. Ford's purpose: repeal of an oversight provision stuck into a new law last December. That provision requires the President to notify "appropriate committees" including the notoriously leaky Senate Foreign Relations and House International Relations Committees, before approving any covert CIA operation abroad. Such wide distribution of this country's most secret operations "makes the protection of vital information very, very difficult," Mr. Ford said.

This presidential concern comes not a moment too soon for the few friends of the CIA still willing to buck the political lynch-mob psychology which began with disclosures about the CIA's clandestine work in Chile and illegal spying on American citizens.

Indeed, the apparent reluctance of both the White House and embattled CIA Director William Colby to shout their fears about destruction of the agency has infuriated serious-minded intelligence experts. "For the life of me," one such expert told us, "I cannot figure out why President Ford and Colby have handled this 'assassination' issue so ineptly."

Asking anonymity, this uniquely well-informed official continued: "As far as I know the CIA never killed any foreign leaders. Plotting may be something else again, but if every thought a man had were translated automatically into action, there would be few of us out of jail or still alive. Would you like to be hung for every nasty fantasy in which you indulged? But assassination, no, sir, and I defy anyone to prove differently."

But when the charge of possible CIA assassinations of foreign leaders surfaced, the instinctive White House reaction was to hand that hot issue to the presidential commission headed by Vice President Nelson Rockefeller. That only gave new wings to rumors that CIA may, indeed, have been executioner at high levels.

Colby, a straight arrow without guile, is desperately trying to hold back the floodgates by offering his full coopera-

tion to the separate, year-long probes about to start in the Senate and House. Intimates say that when the assassination charge first came up, he refused categorical denials on grounds that these probes might turn up shreds of evidence—unknown to him—tending to link CIA with summit murders.

Colby's policy is passionately debated by him and top-level CIA officials with their own conflicting views. Colby contends that in today's rancid political climate, his job is to reveal almost everything to any duly-constituted congressional committee and claim executive privilege only in extraordinary cases.

Some former intelligence officials believe he has no alternative. Within the agency itself, one group of officials has pressed for total exposure of everything the agency has ever done and for prosecution of officials who broke laws.

But another faction violently disagrees. Their thesis: almost everything the CIA has done was under direct orders from a President of the United States. Yet the agency is now asked to take the rap for extra-legal activity. So, take the heat—but tell nothing that could compromise the CIA's daily routine.

In fact, daily routine is already compromised to a point that the agency is now engaging in a bare handful of covert "operations" abroad, none particularly sensitive. Moreover, exchange

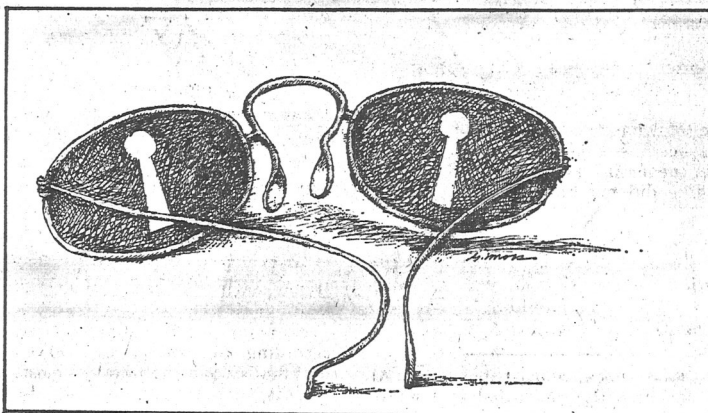
deals with foreign intelligence agencies are drying up and U.S. businessmen, acting for years as invaluable informants and CIA fronts, have become "impassioned" in breaking off all CIA contacts.

Also evaporating are the highly useful deals by which a foreign nation's intelligence service does field work for the CIA in "coattail operations" financed by the CIA. When one such foreign service demanded a signed letter from the CIA that a particular operation would never surface, the agency could not give such assurance; the operation was aborted.

Colby is well aware of criticism against his policy of total cooperation with the multitude of investigators. His aim is to avoid an "adversary relationship" with congressional probes, depending on their self-control to preserve national security. But critics fear that as the House and Senate probes get up steam, the penchant for leaking long-buried secrets extremely harmful to U.S. foreign policy will prove irresistible.

The President's signal that he intends to tighten the new scatter-gun oversight role of Congress serves as a somber warning to the two investigating committees. If their 21 members cannot keep the CIA's past and present secrets, Congress will not have a long-range oversight role. The CIA will have died an unnatural death.

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By Geoffrey Moss for The Washington Post